2. Principles of Biblical Exegesis in the *Homilies for Major Feast Days* and the *Hagiorite Tomos* of St Gregory Palamas

The Very Revd. Professor Dr.
Marian Vild

Abstract: St Gregory Palamas is well-known for his dogmatic work and his connection to hesychasm. In contrast, he is rarely considered from a biblical perspective, although his works abound in references to the Scripture. This study aims to fill this gap by drawing attention to the works of St Gregory from a biblical perspective. The investigation will focus on some of St Gregory's homilies for the major feast days and the Hagiorite Tomos. As will be shown, St Gregory's relation to the biblical texts is important for two reasons: first, because of the continuity with the patristic tradition of interpreting the Scripture; and second, because St Gregory articulates very clearly some of the main features of patristic exegesis. The study will focus on: (1) the permanent appeal to other texts of the Scripture in the process of interpreting biblical texts; (2) the normativity of the patristic exegesis of the Scripture; (3) the ecclesiastical framework of biblical interpretation; (4) spiritual experience as a norm for understanding biblical descriptions; (5) actualization as a practical result in the process of biblical exegesis.

Keywords: St Gregory Palamas, biblical exegesis, biblical hermeneutics, Scripture, homilies.

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Introduction

This study aims to contribute to the growing scholarship on Orthodox biblical hermeneutics. Over the past 80 years, Orthodox biblical scholars have tried to outline an Orthodox biblical hermeneutics: a hermeneutics in which the patristic interpretation of the Scripture has a

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

special place, for the reason that, in contemporary Orthodox theology, the patristic interpretation of the Bible is considered normative for biblical exegesis. In 1936, in Athens, at the first meeting of the Orthodox theological faculties, Fr George Florovsky enunciated a principle emphasizing the necessity of returning to the theology of the Fathers of the Church. Following this call, Orthodox biblical scholars are now trying to recover patristic exegesis. This recovery is not only about rediscovering, translating, or citing the exegesis of the Fathers, but also, and more importantly, about regaining what has been called the *paterikon phronema* 'the mind of the Fathers'; that is, how they read, understood, explained, and applied the words of the Holy Scripture. More than that, it is about how they related to the Scripture in the ecclesiastical context.

As a result, in the last few years a series of books and studies have appeared written by Orthodox scholars such as John Breck (1998, 2003), Theodor Stylianopoulos (1997), the great Stylianos Papadopoulos (2010), Vasile Mihoc (2013), Constantin Coman (1996, 2001, 2002), to mention just a few. Let me add to this list another recent work, which may be less well-known, but, in my opinion, is one of the best books on this topic. It was written as a Ph.D. thesis in Romanian by Hieromonk Agapie Corbu and entitled: *The Holy Scripture and its Interpretation in the Writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa* (2002).

This effort has not been solely confined to Orthodox scholars. The interest of Western scholars has also been piqued and this has led to a number of collections and books by Western authors. I mention here just a few: a two-volume work by Charles Kannengieser entitled *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* (2004) and *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers: Letter and Spirit* (1995) edited by Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey. Of course, there are a lot of other books and studies, which have appeared and continue to appear on this topic, the interest in recovering the patristic exegesis having led to some significat editorial and research projects. In this sense, I mention here only two of them: *Biblia Patristica* and *Novum Testamentum Patristicum* (Merkt 2012). It is very important to note that the scholastic way in which modern theology divides the history of the Church has negatively influenced research. I particularly have in mind the notion that the "patristic age" extends, at most, only to the eighth century after Christ. This upper boundary has nothing to do with the patristic and ecclesiastical way of understanding the spiritual guidance and the role of the Fathers (Florovsky 1972, 109-112; 1975, 16-22). Nonetheless, this has led to the quasi-universal exclusion of the period after the eighth century from studies on the reception of the Scripture. For example, the writings of the hesychastic movement are for the most part neglected.

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

In an attempt to remedy this, in this study, I will investigate the interpretation of the Bible by St Gregory Palamas, one of the greatest theologians of the Church. I start from a comment by Fr Dumitru Stăniloae, who thought that, in the context of modern theology, we cannot speak of anything serious and concrete about Orthodox theology without including the contribution of St Gregory Palamas (Stăniloae 1993, 5). Indeed, St Gregory's clarifications and distinctions are so important that any theology after him cannot ignore them. I am also inspired by the excellent study of Prof Christos Oikonomou (Oikonomou 2000). As such, although St Gregory did not write detailed commentaries, or leave us specific homilies on the books of the Scripture, his homilies for the great feasts and saints offer us a sufficient basis for understanding his way of interpreting the divine Scripture. In this study, I will try to outline some principles of St Gregory's biblical exegesis starting from his homilies on the major feasts. I will also discuss St Gregory's *Hagiorite Tomos*—although this is not a homily, it is one of the hesychastic works where St Gregory's principle of personal spiritual experience is most clearly articulated.

The permanent appeal to the Scripture as the basis of biblical interpretation

Concerning biblical interpretation, it is very interesting to observe that St Gregory Palamas (like other great patristic exegetes before him, such as John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and others), interprets the texts of the Scripture through constant reference to other texts within it. This manner of exegesis constitutes a peculiarity of the patristic interpretation of the Bible. It is very important to mention that the Fathers of the Church did not base their biblical exegesis on quoting the Fathers that came before them, but rather drew directly on the words of Scripture. Of course, they did appeal to the opinion of the Fathers before them, but mostly as an aid to interpreting a difficult text, the Scripture at all times being their first resource. In this sense, the majority of the homilies of St Gregory Palamas can be defined as exegetical homilies *par excellence* (Coresciuc 2013). In his preaching, St Gregory extensively used biblical texts because, in patristic understanding and practice, the reception of the revelation is an active one and it is part of redefining humankind in Christ, which reveals Himself as divine Logos. As an example of this manner of doing exegesis, I will quote a small part from *Homily 24* (24, 9), which he wrote for the Pentecost:

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

In what sense is the Holy Spirit the promise of the Father? He foretold Him through His prophets, saying through Ezekiel, *A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will put my spirit within you* (cf. Ezek 36:26-27). Through Joel He proclaims, *And it shall come to pass in the last days, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh* (cf. Joel 2:28). Longing for the Holy Spirit, Moses cried out in anticipation, *Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord Would put his spirit upon them* (Num 11:29). As the gracious will of the Father and His promise are one and the same as the Son's, Christ told those Who believed in Him, *Whosoever drinketh of water that I shall give him, it shall be to him a well of water springing up into everlasting life* (John 4:14), and *He that believeth in me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water* (John 7:38). By way of explanation, the Evangelist says, *Thus spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe in him should receive* (John 7:39). As He approached His saving Passion He told His disciples, *If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth* (John 14:15-17). And again, *These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you. But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things* (John 14:25-26). And yet again, *When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from Father, he shall testify of me* (John 15:26), and *he will guide you into all truth* (John 16:13).
(Homily 24: *On how the Holy Spirit was manifested and shared out at Pentecost. Also about Repentence*, pp.28-29).

Ἀλλὰ πῶς ἐπαγγελία τοῦ Πατρὸς τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον; Ἐπειδὴ διὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ προφητῶν προεπηγγείλατο τοῦτο, διὰ μὲν τοῦ Ἰεζεκιὴλ λέγων, «δώσω ἡμῖν καρδιὰν καινὴν καὶ Πνεῦμα καινόν, καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα μου δώσω ἐν ὑμῖν», διὰ δὲ τοῦ Ἰωήλ, «καὶ ἔσται ἔν ταῖς ἔσχάταις «μέραις ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ Πνεύματός μου ἐπὶ πᾶσαν σάρκα». Τοῦτο καὶ ὁ Μωϋσῆς ἐπιποθῶν, προανεφώνησε λέγων, «τις δώσει πάντα τὸν λαὸν Κυρίου προφήτας, ὅταν δῷ Κύριος τὸ Πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐπ'αὐτούς;». Ἐπεὶ δὲ μία ἐστιν ἡ εὐδοκία καὶ ἡ ἐπανγγελία τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ, διὰ τοῦτο τοῖς εἰς αὐτὸν πιστεύουσιν εἰπών, «ὁ πιὼν ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος, ὃ ἐγὼ δώσω αὐτῷ, γενήσται πηγὴ ὕδατος ἀλλομένου εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον», καὶ, «ὁ πιστεύων ἐμέ, καθὼς εἶπεν ἡ Γραφή, ποταμοὶ ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας αὐτοῦ ρεύσουσιν ὕδατος ζῶντος»· ὃ ἑρμηνεύων ὁ εὐαγγελιστής, «τοῦτο δε», φησήν, «ἔλεγε περὶ τοῦ Πνεύματος ὃ ἔμελλον λαμβάνειν οἱ πιστεύοντες εἰς αὐτόν». Ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ σωτήριον ἐρχόμενος πάθος πρὸς τοὺς οἰκείους μαθητὰς ἔλεγεν, «ἐὰν ἀγαπᾶτέ με τὰς ἐντολὰς τὰς ἐμὰς τηρήσατε· καὶ ἐγὼ ἐρωτήσω τὸν Πατέρα, καὶ ἄλλον Παράκλητον δώσει ὑμῖν, ἵνα μένῃ μεθ'ὑμῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, τὸ Πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας»· καὶ πάλιν, "«αὗτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν, παρ'ὑμῖν μένων· ὁ δὲ Παράκλητος, τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, ὃ πέμψει ὁ Πατὴρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου, ἐκεῖνος ὑμᾶς διδάξει πᾶντα»· καὶ πάλιν, «ὅταν ἔλθῃ ὁ Παράκλητος, ὃν ἐγὼ πέμψω ὑμῖν παρὰ τοῦ Πατρός, τὸ Πνεῦμα τῆς ἀληθείας, ὃ παρὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορεύεται, ἐκεῖνος μαρτυρήσει περὶ ἐμοῦ καὶ ὁδηγήσει ὑμᾶς εἰς πᾶσαν τὴν ἀλήθειαν».
(*'Ομιλία 24, 9 εις την Κυριακήν της Πεντηκοστης*, pp.110-112).

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

Although at first glance, this may look like what has been called in the West *Scriptura Scripturae Interpres*, I argue that it is not. First, we can observe that this way of interpreting the Bible has strong roots in the synagogue *modus* of interpreting texts and from here, in the way in which Jesus himself explained the Old Testament. A classic example one can find in the Gospels is the text of Luke 4:16, where Jesus reads and interprets a certain fragment from Prophet Isaiah in the synagogue of Capernaum. This form of discourse on the biblical text is the basis for what later was called "homilies". From the early Church through to late patristic exegesis, one can find this "style" of biblical interpretation. As such, we can say that this is a specific Judeo-Christian modus of biblical interpretation, which can be observed diachronically as seeing a certain influence of the synagogue preaching style on the Christian sermon. In a very practical way, this connection is visible also in the fact that, in the homilies of St Gregory Palamas, the Old Testament texts are used to such a degree that they cannot be neglected. Second, the Scripture is explained with the help of other passages of the divine text, which develop the same teaching or complete the understanding about the same reality or situation. However, this does not mean that the Scripture can explain itself, but rather that the interpreters have appropriated the text, which becomes their life, in keeping with the Pauline exhortation: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom" (*Col* 3:16 KJV). Or: "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (*Eph* 5:19 KJV). The Fathers of the Church turned the words of the Scripture into a vehicle, which they used to speak about spiritual life. This is what one can find in the Divine Liturgy too. All the texts, even the prayers which the priests have to say in a lower voice, are full of biblical expressions. In the same way, the Fathers use inspired verses, words, and expressions from the whole of the Scripture for interpreting one specific biblical verse or passage. The thinking behind this approach is that the inspired Scripture can be interpreted best only by a person, who is living with the same Holy Spirit that inspired the divine text, and the best way to express this interpretation is with the words of divine Scripture.

This explains why St Gregory often cites half-verses only. Indeed, his references to the Bible are not citations of the Bible, but they are biblical phrases used to express his own interpretation:

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

What will be the outcome of this life of constraint and the reward for these struggles? That ye may be, it says, children of your Father which is in heaven (Matt. 5:45), *heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ* (Rom 8:17); *that you may have immortal life and receive an ineffable, unshakable, unending kingdom, living and reigning with God for endless ages*
(Homily 22: *On the same Feast [sc. The Ascension] Referring also to Passions and Virtues*, pp.7-8).

Τί δὲ τὸ τοῦ βιαίου τούτου βίου τέλος καὶ τῶν ἀγώνων τὸ ἔπαθλον; «Ὅπως γένησθε», φησίν, «υἱοὶ τοῦ Πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς», καὶ κληρονόμοι μὲν Θεοῦ, συγκληρονόμοι δὲ Χριστοῦ, καὶ ζωὴν ἀθάνατον σχοίητε καὶ βασιλείαν ἄρρητον, ἀσάλευτον, ἀδιάλευτον, ἀδιάδοχον παραλάβητε, εἰς αἰῶνας ἀπείρους τῷ Θεῷ συζῶντες καὶ συμβασιλεύοντες
(*Ὁμιλία 22, 11 εις την Ἀνάληψιν Δευτέρα*, pp.60).

As we can see, like all the Church Fathers, Palamas had a strong grounding in the Bible and he understood and related to the Scripture not as a book, no matter how important, but rather as to the living Word of God and a testimony about God and life in God, to lead, inspire, and fulfil a Christian life.

Patristic biblical exegesis is the norm for interpreting Scripture

Even if St Gregory did not quote very often from the Fathers of the Church in his interpretation of the Bible, the appeal to the Fathers is clearly very important to him. He has a strong ecclesiastical consciousness and that is why he relates to the Fathers before him as to other members of the Church who had spiritual experiences similar to those described by the Scripture. In this sense, St Gregory underlines the importance of relating to the ancestors and their spiritual expertise. St Gregory feels that the Christian life is a *modus vivendi* inherited from one's ancestors and not an autonomous *modus* of life. Going further, the Scripture should not be seen as a mere manual with rules that should be followed, but the Words of God; thus, by and through interpreting them, one can understand the biblical way of life, the biblical relation to God, to others, and to the whole of creation. This way of life[1] was experienced by the Fathers and only through this experience can the Scripture be interpreted in a sufficiently deep manner. Therefore, the interpretations of the Fathers are very

[1] This is a reality that has appeared from the Book of Acts onwards, where we find Christianity being called "the road" and "the way" (ἡ ὁδός, -οῦ) many times (9:2; 13:10; 16:17 etc.).

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

important and St Gregory expresses this repeatedly in his writings. For example, in the Homily 34 for the Feast of Transfiguration, he warns believers to run away from those who reject the interpretation of the Church Fathers:

Let us flee from those who reject Patristic interpretations and attempt by themselves to deduce the complete opposite, while pretending to concern themselves with the literal sense of a passage, they reject its godly meaning. We should run away from them more than we would from a snake, for when a snake bites it kills the body temporarily, separating it from the immortal soul, but when these evil men get their teeth into a soul they separate it from God, which is eternal death for the soul. Let us escape as far as we can from such people, and take refuge with those who teach piety and salvation in accordance with the traditions of the Fathers (*Homily on the Transfiguration*, 34, 2, p.134).

Φύγωμεν οὖν τοὺς τὰς πατρικὰς ἐξηγήσεις μὴ παραδεχομένους, ἀλλὰ παρ'ἑαυτῶν πειρωμένους εἰσάγειν τὰ ἐναντία, καὶ τὰς μὲν ἐν τῷ γράμματι λέξεις περιέπειν ὑποκρινομένους, τὴν δὲ εὐσεβῆ διάνοιαν ἀπωθουμένους· καὶ φύγωμεν μᾶλλον ἢ φεύγει τις ἀπὸ ὄφεως. Ὁ μὲν γὰρ ἐνδακὼν τὸ σῶμα θανατοῖ πρόσκαιρα, τῆς ἀθανάτου ψυχῆς χωρῖσας· οἱ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτῆς λαβόμενοι τοῖς ὀδοῦσι χωρίζουσιν αὐτὴν τοῦ Θεοῦ, ὅπερ ἐστὶ θάνατος αἰώνιος τῆς ἀθανάτου ψυχῆς. Φεύγωμεν οὖν τοὺς τοιούτος πάςῃ δυνάμει, καὶ προσφεύγωμεν τοῖς ὑποτιθεμένοις τὰ εὐσεβῆ καὶ σωτήρια, ως συνάδοντα ταῖς πατρικαῖς παραδόσεσι (*'Ομιλία 34, 2 εις την Σεπτην Μεταμορφωσιν*, pp.356-358).

This quote very clearly expresses St Gregory's understanding of the importance and value of the patristic tradition in biblical interpretation. St Gregory's regard for the Fathers is not confined to this passage only; in the immediately preceding context he also says that the divine words of the Holy Gospel come to us through a grace that is so lofty that only the God-bearing Fathers can guide us to it (see ibid 34, 1).

The text quoted above also highlights St Gregory's understanding of the protective function of patristic exegesis. One who takes into account the interpretations of the Fathers can be protected from the great danger of heresy. And this is not just because the Fathers are diachronically closer to biblical events or because they have received and left us a huge heritage, but rather because they had the same experience as the human authors of the Scripture.

The ecclesiastical framework of biblical interpretation

The Church Fathers were members of the Church of their time, and it is in this capacity that they read and explained the Bible. The

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

majority of patristic exegesis was written by authors who were not ordinary members of the Church, but rather monks, deacons, priests, and bishops; in other words, people with a certain degree of responsibility within the ecclesiastic community. Hence, they practiced an exegesis from within the Church directed towards fellow members of the Church (Vild 2015, 152-154). This situation held for St Gregory too. As we can understand from the style and the tone of his homilies, they were prepared for the spiritual edification of the members of the Church of his time. More than that, in his thought there are three aspects of the Church that are interdependent: Divine Grace, the Gospel, and the Bishop (*Hierarch*):

Each hierarch in his turn comes to give the city this grace and gift of God and the enlightenment of divine Spirit through the Gospel. Those who reject any of them, as can happen, interrupt God's grace, break the divine succession, separate themselves from God and deliver themselves up to sinful rebellions and all kinds of disasters, as you are obviously aware from recent experience
(*Homily on Pentecost*, 24, 11, p.29).

Ταύτην οὖν τὴν χάριν καὶ τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὸν διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου φωτισμὸν τοῦ θείου Πνεύματος ἔρχεται κομίσων τῇ πόλει τῶν κατὰ καιροὺς ἀρχιερέων ἕκαστος. Οἱ δε τινα τούτων ἀπωθούμενοι, τὸ εἰς αὐτοὺς ἧκον, διακόπτουσι τοῦ Θεοῦ τὴν χάριν καὶ διασπῶσι τὴν θείαν διαδοχὴν καὶ διϊστῶσιν ἑαυτοὺς τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ στάσεσιν ἁλιτηριώδεσι καὶ συμφοραῖς παντοδαπαῖς παρραδίδονται· ὃ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐπέγνωτε πρὸ μικροῦ πάντως διὰ τῆς πείρας.
(*'Ομιλία 24, 11, εις την Κυριακήν της Πεντηκοστης*, p.112)

These three elements are: (1) the Holy Ghost, which extends the incarnated and resurrected body of Christ to believers; (2) the Gospel, which is the teaching and the power of God incarnated in words; and (3) the hierarchy, through which the sacraments are given to believers and the Gospel is preached. These are the main characteristics of the Church: in this equation, the Scripture (represented here by the name "Gospel") and they cannot be separated from the Church. This understanding is very clear in the context of St Gregory's controversy with Varlaam of Calabria and those who joined him. The hermeneutics of these opponents of St Gregory refused the idea of direct revelation of God through uncreated divine energy (Coresciuc 2013, 229). Put differently, the entire theology of St Gregory is based on the premise of the possibility of direct experience of God through His uncreated energies in the Church. That's why his biblical hermeneutics is pastoral and focuses on spiritual reality, which every member of the Church is called to experience within his life in the Church.

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

Another example can be found in Homily 20, where St Gregory speaks about the Resurrection of Christ and about the cave that was the tomb for the body of Christ. This underlines the fact that the Church is the real cave where the Body of Christ is always present in the altar, and only those who stay in this "cave" to the end and gather and open their minds to divinity can deepen their understanding of the words of the Scripture and see God Himself with the eyes of the mind and also with the eyes of the flesh (Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, *'Ομιλία 20*, 13, 590). In other words, St Gregory is in continuity with the entire patristic tradition according to which a Christian life is a life "in Christ" (as already defined by St Paul: 1 Thess 4:16; Rom 8:10; 1 Cor 1:2; Ephesians 1:1 etc.), and the authentic biblical interpretation, which can only take place within the ecclesiastical framework.

Experience as one of the criteria of biblical exegesis

According to a principle that St Gregory developed in the *Hagiorite Tomos*, those who have not had experience of the Holy Ghost have to appeal to those who have, and these are the Fathers of the Church:

These are persons who have been initiated by actual experience who have renounced possessions, human glory and the ugly pleasures of the body for the sake of the evangelical life; and not only this. But they have also: strengthened their renunciation by submitting themselves to those who have attained spiritual maturity in Christ
(*Prologue of Hagiorite Tomos*).

[...] Οἵ μὲν αὐτῇ τῇ πείρᾳ μεμυηκένοι, ὅσοι τῇ τε τῶν χρημάτων κτήσει καὶ τῇ τῶν ἀνθρώπων δόξῃ καὶ ταῖς τῶν σωμάτων οὐ καλαῖς ἡδοναῖς διὰ τὴν εὐαγγελικὴν ἀπετάξαντο ζωήν, οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν ἀποταγὴν ταύτην διὰ τῆς πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῇ κατὰ Χριστὸν ἡλικίᾳ προήκοντας ἐβεβαίωσαν ὑποταγῆς [...]
(Αγ. Τομος, Προλογος, p.498).

This emphasis on experience as a criterion for the spiritual life, which includes the interpretation of the Holy Scripture, also appears at the end of the *Hagiorite Tomos:*

These things we have been taught by Scriptures and have received from our fathers; and we have come to know them from our small experience
(*Hagiorite Tomos* 7).

Ταῦτα ὑπὸ τῶν Γραφῶν ἐδιδάχθημεν, ταῦτα παρὰ τῶν ἡμετέρων πατέρων παρελάβομεν, ταῦτα διὰ τῆς μικρᾶς ἐγνώκαμεν πείρας [...]
(Αγ. Τομος 7, p.510).

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

We can see in Palamas' works the view that one can understand the deep meaning of the Scripture and the teaching of the Church Fathers only through the experience of God, which presupposes the ascetic life and what the Fathers called *apatheia*. Here we see a crucial element of the exegesis of St Gregory Palamas. One can find many references in his work that true theology is not about words, but about things; not about thoughts and syllogisms, but about life and deeds (Coresciuc 2013, 208). Applying this principle to the biblical texts, one can observe that St Gregory Palamas assumes that historical experience is important for biblical interpretation: the New Testament is based on the historical acts of the Incarnated Son of God. At the same time, the biblical interpretation of St Gregory goes beyond literary and historical analysis. He continues a branch of the patristic tradition of biblical exegesis—a branch that is part of the hesychastic approach to spiritual life and has been manifested in the ascetic writings of the Church. In this tradition, biblical hermeneutics is based on the tradition of *theophany*. His biblical interpretation comes from the direct experience of the reality described by the biblical texts. As some authors have previously commented (Coresciuc 2013, 211; Oikonomou 2000, 600), from the point of view of modern biblical scholarship (in which the historical-critical method is still the foundation for biblical hermeneutics), it is possible that St Gregory Palamas cannot be considered an interpreter of the Bible. In modern scholarship, he is more closely associated with *dogmatics* because of his distinction between the essence of and the energies in God; or with *hesychasm* because of his theology of the divine light. However, as Professor Oikonomou has suggested, St Gregory is very important as an *exegete* (interpreter) too, demonstrating throughout his work (not only in his 63 homilies for the Christian feasts, but in all of his works) an interpretation of the Scripture in which spiritual experience plays a central role (Oikonomou 2000, 600). In other words, St Gregory uses certain hermeneutics, which are those of the living experience of the same spiritual reality described in the Scripture. In this sense, the interpretation of the biblical texts is not only a form of spiritual meditation on the sacred texts and an attempt to extract some teachings that other generations of Christians can follow for spiritual development, but also a way to allow oneself to be guided by the words of the Scripture and to attain an understanding of the deep meaning of the biblical descriptions through living out the same spiritual reality. This is possible not only through reading and meditation, but also through prayer, through the shunning of the passions, through divine grace, and through living the mysteries and the life of the Church. As St Gregory says in Homily 47, true knowledge is that which is proved by deeds (Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

1986, 113).

As a conclusion to this, we can say that in the view of St Gregory Palamas, one can tackle the Scripture only through a conceptual and ascetic effort (Coresciuc 2013, p.251). The exegesis of the biblical texts is an intellectual effort and, at the same time, it is a spiritual-ascetic endeavour with the purpose of purification. Both of these aspects are important factors in the act of exegesis.

The pastoral purpose of Palamas' biblical interpretation: actualisation

The Fathers did not interpret the Scripture for scholarly or academic purposes. Rather, they interpreted them for the benefit of believers who are trying to lead a Christian life within the Church. Their hermeneutics is not a double one—one for the specialist and another for the layman. This is proven by the fact that a large part of patristic exegesis consists of homilies, that is, sermons held within a church and for a church congregation. The superficial manner in which the Fathers sometimes approached certain biblical texts, while focusing much more on others, highlights the pastoral purpose of their exegesis. The Fathers aimed to interpret the biblical texts that were most relevant to the spiritual needs of their audience. Moreover, due to this ecclesiastic nature, the aim of exegesis in patristic thought is not restricted to *intentio auctoris*, *intention operis*, or *intention in receptoribus*.

In patristic thought, the ultimate goal of biblical exegesis is to achieve a resemblance with God. This may be attained by "the acquisition of virtue" (see St Gregory of Nyssa, *Explanation of the Titles of the Psalms*). That is why in most of St Gregory Palamas' homilies, in the second part we find a moral section, which presents a challenge to the recipient to change one's mind and life, to follow Christ and to enjoy what he offers us.

For example, at the end of Homily 24 on Pentecost, he notes:

But let us, brethren, I beseech you, abstain from deeds and words hateful to God, that we may boldly call God our Father. Let us truly return to Him, that He too may turn back to us, cleanse us from all sin and make us worthy of His divine grace. Than shall we keep festival both now and forever, and celebrate in a godly and spiritual

Ἀλλ'ἡμεῖς ἀποστῶμεν, ἀδελφοί, παρακαλῶ τῶν τῷ Θεῷ μεμισημένων ἔργων τε καὶ λόγων, ἵνα μετὰ παρρησίας ἐπικαλώμεθα Πατέρα τὸν Θεόν. Ἐπιστρέψωμεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, ἵνα καὶ οὗτος ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ καθαρίςῃ ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ πάσης ἁμαρτίας καὶ ἀξίους ποιήσῃ τῆς αὐτοῦ θείας χάριτος. Οὕτω γὰρ καὶ νῦν καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

way the accomplishments of God's promise, the Coming of the All-holy Spirit among men and His resting upon them; the fulfilment and perfection of the blessed hope in Christ Himself Our Lord
(*Homily for Pentecost* 24, 17, pp.34-35)

ἑορτάσομεν καὶ πανηγυρίσομεν ἐνθέως καὶ πνευματικῶς τὴν τῆς θείας ἐπαγγελῖας τελείωσιν· τὴν τοῦ παναγίου Πνεύματος εἰς ἀνθρώπους ἔλευσιν καὶ ἀνάπαυσιν· τὴν τῆς μακαρίας ἐλπίδος ἔκβασιν καὶ συμπλήρωσιν ἐν αὐτῷ Χριστῷ τῷ Κυρίῳ ἡμῶν
(*'Ομιλία 24, 17 εις τη. Κυριακήν της Πεντηκοστης*, pp.120-122)

This is the reason why the biblical texts are read and explained not as old historical records about what happened a long time ago, but as being very important for our lives here and now. In interpreting the biblical texts for a certain feast, St Gregory teaches us something concrete for our spiritual edification through the text and the event that is described.

For example, in the Homily for Pentecost, he considers that the event is present now, in celebration:

Truly the Saviour confirmed the Gospel teaching by His deeds and miracles, and fulfilled it through His Sufferings. He proved how beneficial it was for salvation by His Resurrection from the dead, His Ascension into heaven, and now by the descent of the divine Spirit upon His disciples, the event we celebrate today.
(Homily to the Pentecost, 24, 3, p. 24)

Τὴν γὰρ εὐαγγελικὴν διδασκαλίαν ἐπιστώσατο μὲν ὁ Σωτὴρ δι'οἰκείων ἔργων τε καὶ θαυμάτων, ἐτελείωσε δὲ διὰ τῶν αὐτοῦ παθημάτων· παρέστησε δὲ αὐτῆς τὸ μεγαλωφελὲς καὶ σωτήριον διὰ τῆς ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστάσεως, διὰ τῆς εἰς οὐραωοὺς ἀναλήψεως, διὰ τῆς ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν πρὸς τοὺς οἰκείους μαθητὰς νῦν τελεσθείσης τοῦ θείου Πνεύματος ἐπελεύσεως ἣν ἑορτάζομεν σήμερον
(*'Ομιλία 24, 3 εις την Κυριακήν της Πεντηκοστης*, pp.100).

In this sense, the celebration and the texts of the Scripture, which are proclaimed in the Church, have to do not only with *anamnesis*, but also with the actualization of the texts. Their ultimate purpose is the edification of the spiritual life in order to reach God.

Conclusions

Reading St Gregory's homilies for the major feasts, one can discover that their author uses a certain type of hermeneutics when explaining biblical passages. This hermeneutics belongs to the patristic

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

way of relating to the Scripture.

The Scripture and the tradition of its interpretation represented by the exegesis of the Fathers are very important to St Gregory. Because patristic exegesis cannot be reproduced and repeated in a mechanical way, St Gregory does not quote from the various patristic authors; rather, he enters into what was termed "*paterikon phronema*", the "mind of the Fathers" and, like the Fathers before him, he cites the biblical texts themselves as a means of explaining other biblical texts. This has two explanations. First, the Scripture is very important for the Fathers; the reading of the sacred texts and meditation on the biblical words have a special place in their spirituality. The reality of the Incarnation and the revelation that was captured in the Scripture represents the premise of the exegetic process. Secondly, the Scripture is not simply a historical record that is accessed by the Fathers, but the living Word of God.

The exegesis that St Gregory produced in his homilies is dedicated to the ecclesiastical community. Practically, the Scriptures were written and transmitted in the Church, by the Church, and for the needs of the members of the Church. The Scriptures are linked together by the grace of the Holy Spirit, which inspires the human authors of the biblical texts and also its interpreters—the greatest of them being those people with certain responsibilities in the Christian communities. The Scripture cannot be understood and explained outside of the Church, which is where the grace of the Holy Spirit works in many ways. This ecclesiastical approach is very obvious in St Gregory's biblical exegesis.

Belonging to the hesychastic tradition, the biblical interpretation of St Gregory is very much targeted at the needs of those who are involved seriously and deeply in a spiritual life. The personal spiritual experience is an important element of spiritual life. In the *Hagioritic Tomos*, St. Gregory places it next to the Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. Explaining the biblical texts, St Gregory appeals to this experience and argues that outside of it, the Scripture cannot be understood. Only the experience of the spiritual life makes one able to attain a deep understanding of the words of the Scripture. For this reason, his exegesis is based on experience and is filled with exhortations for its recipients to seek out this experience, that is, to strive to live a biblical spiritual experience. In the process of biblical interpretation, St Gregory settles an important principle: those who have no experience must appeal to those who do (the Fathers). In light of this, the necessity for and role of the patristic tradition of biblical interpretation is very clearly shown.

As we have already seen, the exegesis of St Gregory has a marked pastoral and practical dimension. That is why in the final part of

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

his homilies, he expresses a very strong call to the audience to seek the spiritual experiences described in the biblical text. This can be associated with what is called in modern hermeneutics "the actualization of the biblical texts".

This study opens some windows into St Gregory's way of approaching the biblical texts. The sheer number of St Gregory's homilies (63), but also the special way in which he appeals to and explains the biblical texts are both reasons for further research. Topics that have been left out of our discussion here, but would be interesting to investigate further, include the anagogical interpretation of the Scripture, the role of repentance and prayer in the process of exegesis, and orthodoxy and heresy in biblical exegesis, among others.

List of Sources

Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, 1983, *Άπαντα τα έργα* 3, *Πραγματείαι, Δογματικαί και Ομολογιακαί,* Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας (ΕΠΕ) 61, εκδ., Π. Κ. Χρήστου, Πατερικαί Εκδόσεις «Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς», Θεσσαλονίκη, "Αγιορείτικος Τομος", pp.496-514.

Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, 1985*, Άπαντα τα έργα* 9, *Ομιλίες (Α'-Κ')*, Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας (ΕΠΕ) 72, εκδ., Π. Κ. Χρήστου, Πατερικαί Εκδόσεις «Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς», Θεσσαλονίκη.

Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, 1985, *Άπαντα τα έργα* 10, *Ομιλίες (ΚΑ'-ΜΒ')*, Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας (ΕΠΕ) 76, εκδ., Π. Κ. Χρήστου, Πατερικαί Εκδόσεις «Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς», Θεσσαλονίκη.

Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά, 1986, Άπαντα τα έργα 11, *Ομιλίες (ΜΓ'-ΞΓ')*, Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας (ΕΠΕ) 77, εκδ., Π. Κ. Χρήστου, Πατερικαί Εκδόσεις «Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς», Θεσσαλονίκη.

Breck, John, 1998, "Principii ortodoxe de interpretare a Bibliei", trad. de Constantin Jinga, în *Altarul Banatului*, IX, nr. 1-3, pp.75-86.

Breck, John, 2003, *Sfânta în Scriptură în Tradiția Bisericii*, trad. Ioana Tămâian, Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Patmos.

Broz, Jaroslav, 2002, "From Allegory to the Four Senses of Scriptures. Hermeneutics of the Church Fathers and of the Christian Middle Ages", in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, edited by Petr Pokorny and Jan Roskovec, Siebeck Mohr, Tübingen, pp.301-309.

Coman, Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin, 2001, "Premize ermineutice în lucrarea «Răspunsuri către Talasie» a Sf. Maxim Mărturisitorul. Contribuții la o ermineutică biblică ortodoxă" in *Anuarul Facultății de Teologie Ortodoxă "Justinian Patriarhul" din București*, an I, pp.69-110.

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

Coman, Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin, 1996, "Οι προς Θεσσαλονικείς Επιστολές του Αποστόλου Παύλου στην ερμηνεία των νηπτικών πατέρων" (St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians According to the Philocalic Fathers), in vol.: *Παύλεια. Ο Απόστολος Παύλος και η Μακεδονία. Πρακτικά Διεθνούς Επιστημονικού Συνεδρίου*, Βέροια, pp.93-106.

Coman, Pr. Prof. Dr. Constantin, 2002, *Erminia Duhului*, București: Ed. Bizantină.

Corbu, Ierom. Agapie, 2002, *Sfânta Scriptură și tâlcuirea ei în opera Sfântului Grigorie de Nyssa*, (= *The Holy Scripture and its Interpretation in the Writings of St. Gregory of Nyssa*), Sibiu: Teofania.

Coresciuc, Roger, 2013, *Omiliile Sfântului Grigorie Palama. Analiză omiletică*, Iaşi: Ed. Doxologia.

Finan, Thomas şi TWOMEY, Vincent (eds.). 1995. *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers: Letter and Spirit*, Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Florovsky, Georges, 1972, *Bible, Church, Tradition: an Eastern Orthodox View*, vol. 1, in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Belmont, Massachusetts: Norland Publishing Company, pp.109-112.

Florovsky, Georges, 1975, *Aspects of Church History*, vol. 4, in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Belmont, Massachusetts: Norland Publishing Company, pp.16-22.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1993, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: Siebeck Mohr.

Hall, Christopher A., 2011, *Să citim Scriptura cu Părinții Bisericii*, trad. Pr. Prof. Dr. Aurel Pavel și prof. Cînduleț Diana Elena, Editura Universității, Sibiu: "Lucian Blaga".

Hauser, Allan, J. și Watson, Duane F. (eds.), 2003, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1: *The Ancient Period*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan/Cambridge: Grand Rapids.

Hauser, Allan, J. și Watson, Duane F. (eds.), 2009, *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2: *The Medieval through the Reformation Periods*, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Kannengieser, Charles, 2004, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, vol. I-II, Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Lieb, M. et al. (eds.), 2011, *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merkt, H., 2012, "Novum Testamentum Patristicum. Ein Projekt zur Erschließung der Rezeption des Neuen Testamentes in frühchristlicher und spätantiker Zeit", în *Sacra Script*a X, 1 pp.15-38.

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.

Mihoc, Vasile, 2013, "Greek Church Fathers and Orthodox Biblical Hermeneutics" in *Greek Patristic and Eastern Orthodox Interpretations of Romans*, edited by Daniel Patte and Vasile Mihoc, London/New York: Bloomsburry T&T Clark, pp.1-40.

Oikonomou, Christos, 2000. "Ἡ Βιωματική και ἡ μυστική ἐμπειρία ὡς κύριες θεολογικές προϋποθέσεις γιά τήν ἑρμηνεία τῆς Ἁγίας Γραφῆς κατά τον Γρηγόριο Παλαμᾶ", in vol. *Ο Άγιος Γρηγόριος ο Παλαμάς στην Ιστορία και το Παρόν, Άγιο Όρος*, pp.593-615.

Papadopoulos, Stylianos, 2010, Άγιος Ιωάννης ο Χρυσόστομος, *Τόμος Β΄ Η σκέψη του, η προσφορά του, η μεγαλοσύνη του*, Αθήνα: Αποστολική Διακονία της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος.

Staniloae, Pr. Dr. Dumitru, 1993, *Viaţa şi învăţăturile Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Bucureşti: Ed. Scripta.

Stylianopoulos, Theodore, 1997, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, Volume 1. Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press.

Veniamin, C., ed., 2004, *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas*, Volume Two, Homilies XXII-LXII, South Canaan: Saint Tikhon's Seminary Press.

Vild, Pr. Lect. Dr. Marian, 2015, "Cadrul eclezial al exegezei patristice" in *Teologie şi Viaţă*, an XXV (XCI), nr. 5-8, Mai-August, pp.138-160.

Copyright © 2020. Cambridge Scholars Publisher. All rights reserved.

Orthodox Mysticism and Asceticism : Philosophy and Theology in St Gregory Palamas' Work, edited by Constantinos Athanasopoulos, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/open/detail.action?docID=6352
Created from open on 2021-01-16 06:24:28.